

The Things That I Used To Do

As New Orleans and the rest of the nation, not to mention the world, goes through the stay-at-home mandates associated with the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, we are very much aware that we can't do all "The Things That We Used To Do" nor can we enjoy them in quite the same way.

Social distancing is being practiced in a metropolis where conviviality and social proximity are the norm: a city of second lines, parades, food and music festivals, jazz clubs and other music venues, barrooms, carnival krewes, crawfish boils, social clubs, and large masses of tourists partaking in all the Crescent City has to offer. We are, after all, a hospitality town and a social town.

All of this brings to mind a tremendously big hit recording from 1953, "*The Things That I Used To Do*", by Guitar Slim.



*"The Things That I Used To Do", 78 RPM version,
from the collection of Ned Hémard*

One of the biggest hits ever for Art Rupe's Specialty Records of Los Angeles, the song remained on Billboard's Rhythm and Blues charts for a remarkable 42 weeks. It held the number one position for six weeks and was the best-selling R&B record of the year, selling more than a million copies – quite an accomplishment in those days.

So just who was Guitar Slim?



Guitar Slim, real name Eddie Jones

His real name was Eddie Jones and he was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, December 10, 1926, but New Orleans counts him as our own. After his military service during World War II, Eddie spent a couple of years dancing in juke joints in the Delta where he was taught to play the guitar by bandleader Willie Warren. Around 1950 Eddie Jones arrived in New Orleans and took on the name and stage persona of "Guitar Slim". Not only did he become renowned for his outrageous and energetic stage act, he also donned bright-colored suits and dyed his hair to match his wardrobe. And could he play! Slim preferred using a PA system instead of an amplifier, which he always played at peak volume. He experimented with distorting the sounds coming from his electric guitar, usually by increasing the gain on his instrument, producing a growling or fuzzy tone. This major contribution to Rock and Roll came a full decade before Jimi Hendrix.

"The Things That I Used To Do", a great example of a twelve-bar blues progression, was recorded at Cosimo Matassa's J&M Studio in October 1953, where a young Ray Charles accompanied Jones on the piano

and did the arrangements for the session, which went on all night through countless takes. Ray's piano backing and the tuneful horn riffs emphasized the deep regret of Slim's singing voice, and the song has a gospel-influenced preaching feel to it.

Guitar Slim's quintessential recording (which made the list of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll) has influenced, and was copied by, countless recording artists.



The late Earl King of New Orleans (real name Earl Silas Johnson, IV, 1934 - 2003), who took up the guitar at age 15, idolized Guitar Slim and began imitating him. When Slim was injured after wrecking his new Cadillac (while "*The Things That I Used To Do*" was still a huge hit

around the country), the young Earl King was chosen to travel on tour with Slim's band, representing himself as the real item. After pulling off this subterfuge, King became a regular at the iconic R&B club, the Dew Drop Inn in New Orleans – and a prime force in New Orleans Rhythm and Blues for more than four decades.

Rhythm & Blues

YOU'RE SO FINE (Arc, BMI)—Little Walter—Checker 786

Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Nashville and New York returned strong reports this past week. Record also appears on Detroit's territorial chart this week. Flip is "Lights Out" (Arc, BMI). A previous "New Record to Watch."

THE THINGS THAT I USED TO DO (Venice, BMI)—Guitar Slim—Specialty 482

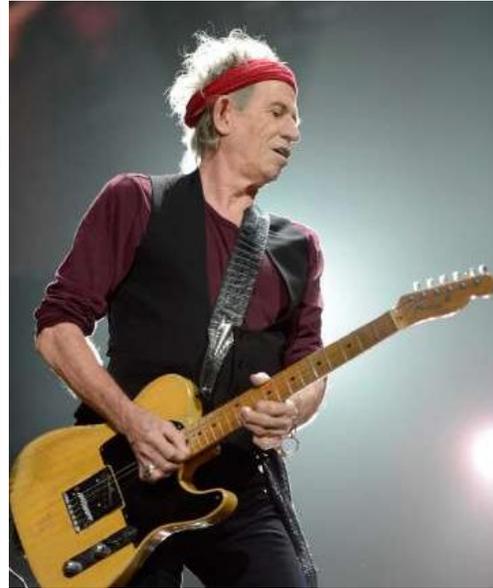
Where this record has been delivered, it has lost no time in getting action. Strong reports were received from New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, Milwaukee and Dallas. Also reported good in Detroit and L. A. Flip is "Well, I Done Got Over It" (Venice, BMI).

From the December 26, 1953, issue of Billboard Magazine

Jimi Hendrix actually recorded "The Things That I Used To Do" on May 7, 1969, in New York, in a guitar duet with Johnny Winter. James Brown recorded the song, as did Stevie Ray Vaughan. On my birthday, April 27, 2004, I had the pleasure of seeing and hearing Keith Richards (of The Rolling Stones) perform the song at the Saenger Theater as part of a four-hour tribute concert to New Orleans Rhythm and Blues called the *Make It Funky* show. Richards' memory for the lyrics was less than perfect, but his command of the guitar was truly outstanding. Many other New Orleans greats performed that night, many no longer with us, such as Allen Toussaint, Art Neville and Snooks Eaglin.



Guitar Slim



Keith Richards

The things that I used to do, Lord, I won't do no more
The things that I used to do, Lord, I won't do no more
I used to sit and hold your hand baby,
Cryin', beggin', do not go

I would search all night for you baby
Lord, and my search would always end in vain
I would search all night for you baby
Lord, and my search would always end in vain

But I knew all along darlin',
That you was hid out wit' your other man

The "twelve-bar blues" is one of the most important chord progressions in popular music. For those of us old enough to remember the PBS series, *Alistair Cooke's America*, you may recall the late British-born American writer seated at a piano in New Orleans playing the twelve-bar blues and fondly recounting the time he first heard those same chords, in the same bar, forty years before - and it made a lasting impression on him. Mastering these simple blues changes are essential elements in building a blues, jazz or rock repertoire.

In musical notation, a bar is the same as a measure. Most often in blues songs, one will count four beats to a measure (or to each bar), known as 4/4 time (meaning each quarter note is equal to one beat). In a blues song this twelve-bar cycle gets played repeatedly through the course of the tune for a powerful musical effect. One can experience this easily on Guitar Slim's impressive blues recording.

It is interesting how our cousins in Britain, from the urbane and erudite Alistair Cooke to the free-wheeling Keith Richards, have embraced the music of New Orleans.

Richards, whose name has been synonymous with Rock and Roll excess, wrote his autobiography *Life* (with the assistance of journalist James Fox) at age 66. It was published almost ten years ago in October 2010. After years of "Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll", even back then Richards' continued survival astounded most people. The aptly named *Rolling Stone* Magazine proclaimed Richards the creator of "rock's greatest single body of riffs" and ranked him fourth on its list of 100 best guitarists. Hendrix was rated Number One.

Richards explained his years of drug addiction in his candid and unsparring memoir, "I never particularly liked being that famous," he explained. And as for his image as bad boy rock renegade, "I can't untie the threads of how much I played up to the part that was written for me," he wrote. "I think in a way your persona, your image, as it used to be known, is like a ball and chain."

Richards maintains that he quit drugs more than forty years ago, but that persona lives on.

Slim's life was also one of excess, but with a more tragic outcome. Having failed to record another hit record, he spent his days as an alcoholic, became ill and found it difficult to breathe. He collapsed after a gig and died of bronchial pneumonia in New York City on February 27, 1959. He was only 32 years old.

His final resting place is a small cemetery in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

May all of you who have friends, family or loved ones who have succumbed to some form of addiction, or who have died or continue to battle the terrible coronavirus, find some comfort in these challenging times.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Things That I Used To Do"
Ned Hémard
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